

John Kelman

He Gave Thanks

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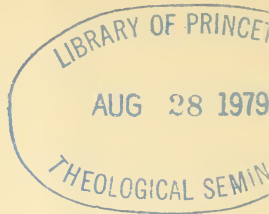
HE GAVE THANKS



JOHN KELMAN
D.D.

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A SERMON

Delivered in the
Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church
New York City
Thursday, November 27, 1919

By the Pastor, the
REV. JOHN K[✓]ELMAN
D.D.

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HE GAVE THANKS

By REV. JOHN KELMAN, D.D.

He Gave Thanks—Luke 22 : 27

IN one of her books, Harriet Beecher Stowe has written these words, *Thanksgiving sermon, in which the minister was expected to express his views freely concerning the politics of the country, and the state of things in society generally, in a somewhat more secular vein of thought than was deemed exactly appropriate to the Lord's day.* That I can not do. I must learn before I speak: and no man, except one from whom wisdom has altogether departed, would venture opinions upon so complex a web of public questions as that which today excites the mind of America. Instead of any such Thanksgiving sermon I shall try today to offer you a few quiet thoughts as to how his first Thanksgiving Day in America strikes a British man.

First of all, the fact of Thanksgiving Day, and the very great emphasis laid upon it, and the feelings associated with it and its customs, seem to me to give to all the world the keynote of the nation's thought. This is an attitude of mind, a tendency towards healthy-mindedness, that expresses itself in thanksgiving rather than in any other of the various ways in which you might celebrate your nationality.

The fasts of old were characteristic; and I dare say it would be good for us if it were possible in

these later days to command something of the grave sweet melody that expressed itself in those self-denying and devotional observances. Yet the fact is that thanksgiving has outlived them, and you celebrate in that. Jane Austen said of one of her characters, *He is a very liberal thinker*, and I think she must have meant an American. It is a glad and wholesome attitude of mind—very characteristic of this nation. Life is always discouraging enough. It is good to turn from its discouragements, to remember happy things and to bring them together here on such a day.

It is also a religious attitude of mind. Dante Gabriel Rossetti said in some of the saddest words he ever wrote, "I would I knew there were a God to thank, when thanks rise in me." Contrast that with the splendid expression of the old Puritan who said, "That devout thanksgiver David, continually declaring the great price he set upon the Divine favor." Christ was at the head of all the thanksgivers of the world, when He thanked God for the great mystery of redemption, although it was to cost Him more pain and agony than was ever endured on earth before. He thanked Him also for everything else in life that had gone to make the experience of those three and thirty years.

And surely the words of Jesus are especially relevant here today. Am I not right in saying that this festival of yours has always been associated with the harvest thanksgiving from the very first day of it? The harvest thanksgiving includes the thanks of all the year for wayside things, for all that has made our

hearts glad and given food to body, or to mind, or to soul. Am I not right in saying also that Thanksgiving Day is essentially the home day, when you gather together in your homes your absent ones in memory and thought, and consecrate the joyousness of the hour to the love of friends.

So Jesus, thanking God at that Last Supper at which He sat with His own, gathered together all the passing memories of the years, and the little band of those He loved most dearly. Such an occasion of thanksgiving takes rank with many other offices of the same sort, the humbler and simpler ones like that of saying grace before meat, and the reverence of family worship in which a family together gathers round the altar and remembers God. There has been in modern times a somewhat mistaken idea about these. There has been a tendency to regard them as duties, though not of the very first order,—duties of a minor kind, and therefore, apt to be more or less irksome. In many homes, both in regard to saying grace before meat and to family worship, there has been a certain readiness to excuse and to dispense with, these observances. Really they should not be looked upon as duties so much as a courtesy, the instinctive action of the politeness of the spirit, of the gentility and good breeding of the Christian soul. If God has given us food, if God has closed or opened a new day for us, surely all that we have learned of the decencies of human intercourse would lead us at least to acknowledge it. Besides the absolute moral demands of life, these are, as it were, an extra part. God's law commands us to

go with Him one mile; God's gentlemen go with him two. The true aristocracy of behavior, the finer *politesse*,—these are a sign of innate self-respect. They are courtesy towards God.

The courtesy of Jesus was continual towards men and women and little children, and towards God Himself. He was always, to God and man, the perfect gentleman. Bread and wine were not a great deal to expect in such an adventure as that upon which He had set out, yet for bread and wine He thanked God, with His disciples.

Is not that typical of much else? and is not this our Thanksgiving Day a fine example of it, when we should remember the wayside constant blessings of life, outnumbering all those sadnesses which are so insistent and so easily remembered? Do you recollect Rupert Brooke's poem called, *The Great Lover*, written very shortly before he died? He said:

*Ere the unthinking silence on that strife
Steals down, I would cheat drowsy Death so far;
My night shall be remembered for a star.*

And the star by which he remembers that night is the long and detailed list of the things he had enjoyed, and for which he was thankful—*wood, coal, graveness of iron; moist black earth; the strong crust of bread; blue, bitter smoke of wood*, and so on—everything that had given him a moment's delight. His catalogue is like Walt Whitman's catalogues of all the varied detail of the riches of God's gifts to man.

So Jesus remembered on that final night the detailed incidents of His life—the fresh winds of

Galilee; the touch of spray upon His cheek on a rough morning in the boat; the sweetness of sunshine, hot and comforting upon wet hands; the scented night breezes; the alabaster box of ointment and its fragrance; the look in the eyes of the young man raised to life upon his bier; the shyness of little children whom He blessed; the cool, refreshing touch of the water on His lips at the well of Samaria—these, and a thousand other memories were included among the things for which He gave thanks—the delicious manifold detail of human life.

And that surely sets a point of view for us all. Gladness and appreciation are the essential Christian note. Every virtue and every experience becomes exuberant when it becomes Christian. He who knows Christ well, knows how to rejoice. *Just enjoy to the depths of your soul, says one. That's worship. Be thankful for everything! That's praising God, as the birds praise him. Do unto others! That's all there is of love and religion in one fell swoop.*

Besides these, there is the love of friends, the greatest of all life's prizes: and, amid the friendly greetings of today, I think you will all understand and appreciate it. In our friends the genuine joy of life finds clearest voice. And Jesus was intensely personal. He loved not man, but men. The one thing Jesus asked of life was love. To love greatly and to be greatly loved,—that was His conception of life's perfection. He had got it in very rich measure, for no one was ever so beloved as He was. The poor sinners who loved Him much were precious to

Him, and the 'dead Lazarus made Him weep for the very pathos of the occasion even though he was on the eve of resurrection. There was Peter with all his blundering hobnailed affection, and John with his mystic passion calm on Jesus' bosom; Martha with her bustling tenderness, and Mary with her silent devotion.

Here on such a day as this we remember these things. On this day we bring our love under the eyes of Jesus. Those who are in our homes, and who feast with us today—we love them, and thank God for their love. The absent, the scattered families of the congregation, we gather in tender memory and imagination from the ends of the earth. The departed who have gone from us forever—we love them still, and they are very especially remembered on such a festive day as this. Put no stint on your affection, brothers and sisters of America; open your hearts wide to generosity and the tenderness of love. Give thanks as you celebrate this day for those you love most dearly. It is a rough and shaggy world, it is a difficult and hard world, it is a lonely and cold world, but love redeems it. Let love go free, and give thanks to God this day for love.

First of all, then, this day celebrates our ordinary thanksgiving for the daily blessings of life symbolized by harvest, the ordinary affections, the gatherings in the home, the memories of the absent. But in the second place, your Thanksgiving is a day of national events, and a great series of them lies behind it.

There was 1621, full of memories of Plymouth Rock, and that first winter of starvation until the ships with food arrived. Think of the monuments which celebrate it, one at Southampton where they set out from, and the other at Plymouth Rock where they landed. There was the harvest festival of 1621, and the spring thanksgiving of 1622, at which the little company of Pilgrims gathered in devout gratitude around their simple board. Along with them was the Indian chief who was their guest—emblematic surely, as someone has said, of a festival which is now celebrated by American citizens representing all the races of the world.

Then from 1777 to 1784, a hundred and fifty odd years later, there were thanksgivings for the various events in the War of the Revolution, until the Peace Treaty was ratified on October 19, 1784. Then George Washington issued a proclamation appointing Thursday, November 26, 1789, the first national Thanksgiving, after the Government in America was established.

Then there was Lincoln appointing the twenty-sixth of November, 1863, as the national Thanksgiving after the recent events of the Civil War; and since then every year the President of the United States of America has issued a proclamation for Thanksgiving Day at this season.

After the great War this Thanksgiving has surely special significance. Never was there a greater occasion than this in all the past; never will there be one in the days to come. You are linked on today not only with the harvest and the wayside blessings

of our life, but with the harvest of time and the great events in history.

The harvest of the Revolution was civil liberty and democracy. The harvest of the Civil War was Union. But the principle of Union had been working all through from the day when the churches at Salem and Plymouth stretched out their hands to one another, lessening the opposition of parties, and fostering unity. Through all the history of America Thanksgiving Day has marked the growing union of the States, while the Civil War finally marked the inherent and essential connection between liberty and unity.

And now the great War has taken up these two things, the democracy for which you fought one hundred and fifty years ago and the unity for which you fought half a century ago, into its great and bloody hands, and has made of them a sacrament and an ideal for all time to come. The words you had found in your earlier history are gone out now into all the earth, and your voice to the world's end. Here is democracy upon the larger scale. Here is unity international, and not only interstate; and the logical sequel to all your former strivings is the great ideal of today.

Note that Thanksgiving all along has marked the positive and not the negative elements in these wars. It is said that the Mohammedans have appointed in certain places a prayer to be used in visitations of the plague. When the plague appears in a village, they pray that it will go on to the next village, and no doubt they have a thanksgiving corresponding. Well,

to keep on remembering the points over which we have quarreled, and the bitterness which these quarrels elicited, is a Mohammedan way of thinking about things. Not the enmities, not the causes of enmity, not the defeats of three hundred years, are worth remembering today; but the principles which these wars established, the things which came out of the furnace of war's affliction, and have been made strong and permanent for good. These are the things that make a nation's history, and these we would remember now. Thus the spirit of the ancient days still lasts in great facts and ideals that persist and grow.

But this present year, latest of your Thanksgivings, is surely one that strikes a new note. Britain renders thanksgiving to America today. When men say that we British people are not thankful, do not believe them, brothers and sisters. When they say that we do not understand, pay no heed. The clearest brains, the soundest hearts in Great Britain today know very well what we owe to America. We owe to you, your understanding of the great cause, and of the thing we did when we staked our all upon it at the first; the widespread eagerness to come into the war before it was possible for you to do so; the help you rendered to many thousands of sufferers, and your vast supplies of food and money and munitions of war; the splendid spirit of your whole-hearted coming in; the transformation of your people into an army and of your land into a training ground for war; the fact that

when you came to us—and I was there when your troops first came—you relit our lamps. We were weary, exhausted with years of fighting in the mud. We fought on still in constancy, but we had forgotten something of the light of the old days that drew our boys across the sea. While they had retained all their dogged determination to see this thing through to the end, the interval had been too dreary, too awful, for all those brilliant ideals, for which they went at first so gaily, to retain their clearness and their vividness. You came, and immediately millions of lamps were lit along the darkness of the line. You came, and when our backs were at the wall, we thanked God that you were behind us, as we faced the deadliest our enemy could do.

For your distinguished service by sea in defense and guardianship, by land in battle; for your heavy sacrifices heroically given and your sixty thousand dead; for the women of America and for the thing they did when they gave to us and to the world their sons, their lovers, and their husbands, we thank you. We, too, celebrate Thanksgiving Day this day, and we thank our God upon every remembrance of you for your stand for liberty in the ancient days, for your accomplished unity, and for what you have been, and are, and always will be to us and with us.

The last thing I have to say this morning is just this, that great thanksgiving involves great responsibility. Mere thanks without taking up the burden that it imposes is not a thing worthy of a noble spirit, nor a Christian heart. We must translate our senti-

ment and we must translate our language into deeds, if we would worthily celebrate this day. We must live today and tomorrow in the light of yesterday.

Oh, brothers and sisters, did you ever think what an awful thing it is to render thanks for sacrifice in which you did not share, to render thanks for the death of others while we live? If it evaporates in words,—if we let them die and lie in their graves throughout all the continents of the Old World, and then say “Thanks” and go on our way unmoved,—how shall their spirits, in the silent places to which God has drawn them, regard so poor and miserable a return? Nay, how shall Christ regard it, who gave Himself not for thanks, but for redemption? If it evaporates in words it will harden the heart and degrade the conscience of a nation. Let us pass it into deeds forthwith.

Four things especially I would simply indicate in this connection. First is the condition of Europe. Friends and enemies alike, through vast territories of Europe, are hungry today while you and I are fed. While you are eating your Thanksgiving feast they are perishing by hundreds of thousands for lack of that which would satisfy the cravings of their hunger. Let us remember as we eat and drink today, that, while our table is so abundantly spread, there are millions of the victims of war who are hungry across the sea.

In the second place vast sums of money have been made out of this war. Now, all of this is not profiteering. There are some quite legitimate ways in which it was inevitable that there should be an

increase of wealth, and the money made in these businesses cannot be condemned by any such condemnation. Yet may I venture to say this, that any man who has prospered through the providential fact that his business lay in the line of the war's necessity—any man who has made large quantities of money during this terrible time through which the world has passed—must surely feel upon him on Thanksgiving Day a very special obligation for a very special generosity. If he contrasts his own good fortune with the sacrifice of those by whose wounds and death he is alive and prosperous, he will not withhold his hand. There are others who have profiteered and are profiteering. They are deliberately holding up prices and robbing their fellow-countrymen. They are making the situation difficult for every one, and especially for the poorest. Such have no part in the national thanksgiving. It is not for them. You cannot thank God for that which you have stolen from your nation. You can only restore it, and then go humbly to Him and ask for His forgiveness.

Third, the War has created an unheard of social, industrial and economic unrest. I am not discussing that problem today at all; only I would just say this, that any honest thanksgiving on the part of a nation where that unrest is, must involve the determination to face these matters honestly and justly, to see what we can do in the first place to understand them, and in the second place to solve their problems.

Fourth, and finally, there is the international situation that faces us all on our Thanksgiving. I am not going to talk any party politics, but I want to

appeal to men of every party when I say this, that surely some great international adjustment is necessary and is demanded by conscience today. We cannot go on preparing for future wars to the end of time. We must put all decent public opinion into the scale of some arrangement for the end of war and the establishing of love and good fellowship. First of all there are the Anglo-American relations between our two nations that will certainly be the heart of any effective League of Nations, or of any other arrangement whereby war shall cease. I cannot conceive, my brethren, what any man means by Thanksgiving who does not try to foster that. And beyond that Anglo-American understanding there is the wider unity. After all is said, though you and we were forever at one it would eventually be but a challenge to the rest of the world to array itself against us, if this understanding were not universal. There will be the danger of the revenge of peoples now shattered. There is the danger of the increasing spread of Bolshevism. There are the yellow races lying beyond, waiting for their time. That time no man can forecast, nor can any of us even imagine what it will bring when future days dawn. All these things are to be remembered on Thanksgiving Day, and any just thanksgiving must involve thought for the far future and the long result.

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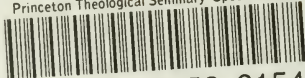
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